

PROGRESS—AN ILLUSION.

BY W. SONNEBERG.

“THE progress of humanity may be compared to the sea during a rising tide,” declared Macaulay. “Each successive wave rushes forward, breaks, and rolls back; but the flood is steadily coming in. A person who looked on the waters only for a moment might fancy they were retiring. A person who looked on them only five minutes might fancy they were rushing capriciously to and fro. But when he keeps his eye on them for a quarter of an hour and sees one sea-mark disappear after another, it is impossible for him to doubt the general direction in which the ocean is moved.” Apt is this comparison in a double sense: apt within the closest meaning of appropriateness; apt in that it demonstrates the common course of deductions as being inconclusive and framed from partial phenomena.

Did our person watch the sea for six hours he would observe that it had lost its former advantages. Did he watch it for twelve hours he would have witnessed an example of the complete cycle in the history of human progress. Neither making a total backward or forward movement nor standing still, humanity is ever beating and tearing at the boundary of the beyond or falling back dismayed, bruised and bleeding.

To demonstrate this cycle movement, in which all forms of animate life participate, we must make manifest the falsity of the basic idea of evolution.

M. Poincaré insists that the most important hypotheses are true only so long as known facts substantiate them, and that all hypotheses are condemned to scientific oblivion as soon as enough new facts arise to combat them. Which is merely another way of saying that man in his eagerness to coordinate the phenomena of the universe into one system explaining the whole, has invariably made his de-

ductions from insufficient data, with the result that time has vindicated the error in each particular instance.

Optimism and credulity are the undoing of the prophet. From the angle of inclination, manifest in certain modern tendencies, he continues upward in an undeviating line towards the clouds. A single section of the historic activity of the race serves him as a base from which to project into the unsuspecting future, a prophecy which ignores such petty laws of nature as gravity and cohesion.

The eye of man commonly sees only the high and illuminated points of the historic horizon. The details of hill and valley, growth and decay are lost to him in the general perspective. Thereupon he is easily convinced when the word of the prophet coincides with his prejudice and his opinion. And strangely enough this narrow view of the phenomena of nature persists in an age ostensibly devoted to liberality as opposed to the broader view obtaining through so many centuries with a people popularly condemned as bigoted.

Through Greek and Roman literature, and Eastern thought, is to be found reference to the cycle in which all animate nature was believed to share impartially, in direct contrast to the modern conception of progress. This idea of the cycle, maintained so many years, has been succeeded by a theory which psychologically spells egotism. The rapid march of scientific investigation, the great stride in material matters, has carried us in imagination away off on a tangent from the old paths apathetically circled by ancient nations.

Man has assumed the burden originally borne by God, and buoys himself with the hope of outwitting nature by the vain assumption.

Optimism associates itself with the belief in progress, and pessimism with non-belief. If to be governed by egotism is optimism, and to be directed by nature is pessimism, the connection is confirmed. That the optimism of the progressive program may defeat its own purpose is patent. An attitude of absolute faith in inevitable improvement tends to reduce the impetus towards perfection by a relaxation of those efforts which would otherwise be engaged to that end.

Whatever consolation is to be derived from the philosophy of history is at best negative. Initiation into the design of nature lies not in the way of evolution. The perplexity of the older philosophers becomes more perplexed by the addition of elements which confuse the issue and isolate the observer sympathetically.

Contrary to the common expectation, scientific reasoning carries us further and further from the fountain head of truth in re-

gard to the understanding of life. The mystery repels the repeated assaults of cold-blooded logic and reveals itself to the psychologically elect. Faith has here an advantage over skepticism. Human standards are pitifully inadequate to the measuring of universal happenings.

As we diverge from the spiritual path into the material, we surrender former estimation of values; we charge the future ill-equipped for the fray, and alienate those influences most favorable to an estimable intuition.

Nature produces large flowers, radiant flowers and fragrant flowers; but combines not the three qualities in one. Every attempt of man to subvert the order of nature in this respect has been unsuccessful. Between size, odor and beauty, he must choose. The *National Food Magazine* gives notice that "Efforts of the poultry-man to produce a chicken that will combine the best meat qualities with the best laying qualities have not been entirely successful, as, in chickens, like cattle, it seems that other qualities must be sacrificed for the sake of meat, and *vice versa*."

The question we ask of our social organism is, How far has it sacrificed spiritual qualities for material qualities? How have morality and happiness fared in the direction of what can truly be called progress?

"It used to be said that he who made two ears of corn grow where only one ear had grown before was a benefactor to the race," remarks James Bryce. Then he asks, "Is it necessarily so? The number of men who can live off the soil is larger, but the men need not be better off. If there is more food then there are also more mouths." This proposition forces us to decide whether a growing population is an indication of progress or a mere survival of an old idea from those ages when the gathering of arms was the strength of the city.

Evidences of improvement in general health or physique are exceedingly difficult to obtain, because the balance which nature maintains in each case of betterment is reckoned on a different scale than we ordinarily impose.

Even those who have adopted the hypothesis of evolution with its survival of the fittest, etc., are obliged to relinquish it on the threshold of modern society. Here this grand and noble theory no longer holds good. Here the weak and ill-equipped are pampered and encouraged; the strong are over-burdened. The factory system on one hand and social patronage on the other, insure at least a surcease of these rigid laws which are conceived to have originally

preserved the strong man and eliminated the weak, nor is authority lacking in proof thereof, viz., Robt. Hunter, Jacob Riis, and Jack London. What significance attaches to the abandonment of man by nature just as he is about to enter the final lap in the race to perfection? Or has the evolutionary course imagined for man been merely a tribute to his egotism which must now be discountenanced? Those who make a fetish of the evolutionary hypothesis and pin their faith to the inflexibility and unvariableness of natural laws are convicted of blind egotism out of their own logic. Biblical miracles are condemned because they involve an outrageous suspension of natural laws as man conceives these laws, yet this condemnation carries with it the doom of the hypothesis of evolution in its narrower conception. When man pits his finite conception of miracles against the infinite possibilities of nature, he is guilty of an anachronism which would bring reproach upon a Hottentot. The untaught child is nearer the heart of truth than the knowledge-laden man.

The records of the past are comprehensive and unequivocal. The egotism of the age manufactures for present humanity a soul-invention not guessed at by humanity past. Egotism introduces a principle more elusive than the fourth dimension, more mythical than the Golden Age, more hypothetical than the Martians.

Emanating from the atmosphere which is created by the hypothesis of evolution this principle fades with the ghostly retreat of the hypothesis. How exorcise so plausible an hypothesis? How secure a worthy substitute which will satisfy the scientific as well as the credulous mind? In default thereof we must discover a principle which coordinates all the known phenomena, and accounts for all those imperfections which the story of evolution glided over. Our principle must account for the bulk of the elephant and the swiftness of the rabbit; the radiance of the sun-flower and the fragrance of the violet; the strength of the shark and the agility of the eel; it must likewise account for the magnitude and stupidity of pre-historic animals compared with the lightness and intelligence of the contemporary, and explain the multitude of exceptions which modern research has found a stumbling block to the unquestionable establishment of the theory of evolution.

Emerson gave us the key to this principle in his study of compensation. "For every benefit which you receive a tax is levied.—Human labor, through all its forms, from the sharpening of a stake to the construction of a city or an epic, is one immense illustration

of the perfect compensation of the universe. Everywhere and always this law is sublime."

The tax is inseparable from the gain. Disturb the balance of nature in one direction and it reasserts itself in another. Everywhere and always this law is sublime!

Using this key to unlock the mystery of the universe, we find the mystery a mystery no longer. As we open the door and a flood of light is poured into the dark chamber, we see in the boundless crucible of life a succession of familiar molecules ever shifting, uniting and dividing; a chemical mass whose seething constituents are active in the interchange of the most commonplace substances; a fund of chemical commotion in which each atom gives to each new molecular combination some quality for which the combination must pay the price in flavor, texture, or durability. Always supreme the law of give and take!

For the primary chemical elements, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, substitute the primary physical elements, strength, agility, courage. So. let loose upon the world are certain atoms, or agglomerations of electrons to put a fine point upon it, each with its peculiar properties, which men inherit or appropriate through accident or design. Humanity has bequeathed it a definite fund of these atoms which it frames into molecules or individuals who possess characteristics according to their atomic construction.

Both sugar and wood are composed of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen; their difference is quantitative rather than qualitative. From a determinate weight of sugar can be obtained a determinate weight of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen; similarly with wood. The atom is unvarying, changeless; the molecule is constantly altering its composition.

Mendelief said, "Chemistry recognizes how changes take place in combinations of the unchanging." It is the business of chemistry to trace the changes of properties which are brought about by combining unchanging atoms so as to form different kinds of molecules. It is the business of philosophy to trace the changes of the character of the individuals brought about by the combination of primary elements.

The molecular constitution in the physical organization is for the most part as strongly marked and as limited quantitatively as the chemical. It is governed by practically the same laws of affinity and distribution. And if the physical molecule or individual is not so inexorably restricted in the matter of the interchangeability of its parts, and the establishment of an invariable weight of constit-

uents, there is always maintained a balance,—within liberal limits of course, which if disturbed in one direction reasserts itself in another. There is not space in one individual for a maximum of frivolity, wisdom, artistic impulse, and business sense, any more than there is space in a molecule for a maximum of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen at one and the same time. That is why men specialize. They recognize that one attribute must be developed at the expense of others. The law of compensation holds firm.

Take specialization in the orange. Eliminate the seed of the orange, and the pulp multiplies in answer to the law of compensation. Increase the size of the fruit beyond reasonable limits and the assertion of balance causes the flavor to suffer.

Consider the balance in human history. Suppose we look upon the known history of the race as a physical organization which has undergone certain transformations as a result of differing and various influences during different epochs. The prevailing character of Egyptian supremacy was religious; that of Greece, philosophic and artistic; that of Rome, political; that of the Modern, material. Each nation in its respective flourishing period, manifested an affinity in correspondence with the general receptivity of its population.

Correlated with the Egyptian capacity for religious governance was the coarctation to other forms of mental activity. The same is true of the philosophical control of Greece, the political absorption of Rome, and the material dominance of the modern era. Capacity in one direction premises abridgement in others.

To-day painters paint pictures, poets sing songs, philosophers philosophize, theologians argue, politicians plan; but high above all the principal incentive to action, the pride of peoples, the absorbing ambition, hovers the spirit of materialism. Our up-to-date music is Strauss's reproduction of the sound of factory whistles blended with the whirr of wheels; our art presents the narrow chasms of New York city streets, bordered on either side by lighted cliffs of towering office buildings. While these are mere surface facts, they indicate the general flow of the intellectual stream—if indication be needed for a current so swift that it bears, if properly steered by capitalistic scandal, any craft to a one hundred thousand subscription list over night. Says the Philistine De Casseres: "The soul of the New Yorker is a mere measuring utensil. It is a gauge for material things only. 'What does it cost?' 'What can I sell it for?'—are his first questions. All art is merchandise, all beauty is pressed into the service of advertising pills, porous plaster and beers. The man

of literary skill is told to write advertisements; the great musician is directed to a café; the talented painter is set to work on magazine illustrations."

We have accustomed ourselves to think that our inventions, luxuries and conveniences are the output of a brain power never before attained by the races of men. This is an assumption of intellectual superiority not substantiated by facts. There are probably more units than formerly subject to the mental stimulation of available knowledge, a more level and commonplace equality in the domain of intellect; which is quite apart from the establishment of a unique creation in brain quality.

Greek thought indisputably lies at the foundation of all modern speculation. The claim of Egypt and of China to some of our fundamental inventions is urgent. Explicit evidence of the existence of a high order of intelligence among early peoples is not wanting. A capricious intelligence follows the paths of least resistance. Regulation of the path of least resistance is beyond human ken. When an irresistible intellect meets an immovable object, it detours gracefully.

Intelligence is translated by dominant social forces into the species of activity dictated by environment and temperament. Whether the activity be philosophical, or political, or material, has no significance in terms of brain quality. The age is the slave of circumstance, and the individual is the subject of the age. Had the Church not been tyrannical, the sixteenth century would probably have witnessed some other form of reformation; had Luther not been born, the sixteenth century could not have elapsed without a great schism in the Church.

Through all the interplay of intellectual activity, the balance in compensation has been maintained. Optimism, born of the scientific advance of the century, fosters the belief that the balance can permanently be disturbed in favor of posterity. Much is hoped from environment. And in a sense environment has improved. But the improvement, when summarized, is discovered to be rather illusive and with a private balance of its own. "In millions of copies the vulgar newspaper pictures of crime reach the homes of the suggestible masses," declares Professor Münsterberg, "and every impulse toward the forbidden is dangerously reinforced. Every brutality spreads outward and accentuates the lawless impulses in the surrounding world."

Curiously illustrative of the paradoxical way of progress is the progress in matters sanitary. Increased density of population has

necessitated additional sanitary precautions, and improved sanitary conditions encourage further congregation of the people. Being the spur to sanitary improvement, the crowded condition must always be ahead of the remedy by a tantalizing few thousand souls or so. Since men commonly do not anticipate a remedy, the reciprocal relation between progress and its cause is not totally complimentary to those even in the van of the movement. Especially is this true in the case of philanthropy, where progressive economic conditions contribute a dole to those who have been deprived, by the conditions, of a rightful heritage.

Nor are other signs more promising when weighed in the balance. It is presumed to be a mark of advancement that the penalty for the courage to deliver the truth is now limited to social and commercial ostracism, whereas formerly it meant the gallows. Ostracism as against the gallows does not altogether commend itself for an advance in the humane art.

The vagaries of the moral mode are an admirable gauge of the whole progressive movement. The compensation element working here is obvious to all but the utopian-minded. From Lecky we learn that every age and every nation has certain characteristic vices, which prevail almost universally. Succeeding generations change the pattern of their morals with the fashion of their clothes; patronize small wiles and small waists instead of open brutality and bustles, without adding to either the sum total of the comfort of the soul or of the body. New forms of wickedness are invented to replace the old ones abhorred, and salvation for the race *en bloc* is still in the future.

Every addition to the sum of pleasure, James Bryce assures us, may bring some pain with it, for the enjoyment of each pleasure creates a desire to have more of it. Where new conditions have enabled men to acquire a taste for something, the want of it is felt as a privation which may become a hardship.

Just as a horticulturist must sacrifice numbers to size, and each quality to the detriment of some other quality, so in the crucible of nature is a fixed amount of elementary material which can be worked over into various products never possessing at once all those qualities which are held to be desirable, but passing in turn through successive transformations suggested by the contemporary predominant environmental influence.

Sir William Ramsay, who came to the study of the philosophy of history with the evolutionary theory firmly rooted in his mind, had to admit that he found so many facts which refused to fit the

theory that he was compelled to abandon it, at least in its narrowest interpretation. The ease with which one can arrange religions or philosophies in a series from the lowest to the highest and assume that this series represents a historical development, should at once arouse one's suspicions. But where egotism is concerned, suspicion is somnambulant. Egotism betrays into fresh egotism.

How simple it is to become the dupe of our own ingenuity we learn from the experience of Sir William. Beginning the study of Greek religion as a follower of Robertson Smith and MacLennan and accepting the Totemist theory as the key of truth, he was forced by the evidence to the view that degeneration is the outstanding fact in religious history, and that the modern theory often takes the *last* products of degeneracy as the facts of primitive religion.

The abandoned theories of the past bear witness to the transient value of hypotheses which embrace incomplete observations. Freed from prejudice and preconception, any view which we choose to take of the *complete* phenomena of nature reveals its essentially chemical character.

Applied to animals, to men, or to things, the principle of the cycle and its compensatory adjunct provides a rule of action which the hypothesis of evolution, plausible as it is, scarce dares hope to dispute. Although we cannot anticipate combinations, given the combination, the result can be computed as approximately as our familiarity with the molecular structure permits. The germination of a seed and the development of a nation are chemically associated.

Chemical formula is the compendium of life manifestation everywhere. Atoms generally combine and recombine to form various materials; never losing their identity and passing ceaselessly through a cycle of changes ordained by fate and regulated by a higher law than man is capable of comprehending.

However displeasing the prospect may be to those who must squeeze a moral from every passing molecule, the phenomenon has its compensation. The incongruity is chargeable to imagination rather than to fact; man's place in the universe not having been as yet established. Happiness is an internal-symbol dependent upon the molecular arrangement, so that the environment of the molecule is not of such great importance as its intrinsic constitution.

There is nothing necessarily depressing in the concept that racial evolution is a myth. It is to the belief in inevitable progress, as exemplified in the hypothesis of evolution, that we owe much of the egotism and irreligion of the day. Whereas belief, if it must be bolstered by an underlying thought of personal advantage, finds

a more adequate realization in the cycle principle, which offers to the individual the opportunity to advance, irrespective of the circling mass, whose opposing efforts can never be organized into a collective ascent of the hill approaching the "Celestial City."

That portion of the cycle in the visible history of the individual, which pertains to known activity on this sphere, can best accomplish a desirable destiny for itself unembarrassed by the prescription of physicians who are to be satisfied with nothing less than the simultaneous cure of all their patients.

Character is largely the outcome of a single life. We may bequeath that to the rising generation which will help to make or mar their lives, but the final issue is a matter of individual specific gravity independent of the rise and fall of social systems.